Factors that de-motivate EFL students' participation at a school of languages in the state of Veracruz, Mexico[1]

Factores que desmotivan la participación en clase de los alumnos de inglés como lengua extranjera en una escuela de idiomas

Diana Iveth Sánchez-Hernández, Enrique Vez-López, and Yeraldi García-Barrios[2]*

Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico

Abstract

The goal of this small-scale qualitative study was to investigate the reasons and factors that may demotivate a group of university EFL students from participating in class, in the context of a school of language in the central part of the state of Veracruz in Mexico. While previous studies conducted, in this same setting, have focused on factors that affect classroom participation in general, this study involved interviews and observations to gain a comprehensive overview of the demotivating factors that impact these EFL students' participation levels in terms of oral production. The study focuses on the participation habits of the interviewed students, their perceptions of the factors that may inhibit them, that discourage them from participating fully in class, and that affect learning. The findings suggest that the participants' perceptions of what participation means, and their self-esteem and confidence affect their level of involvement. They also indicate that the teacher's role is an important variable in why students decide to remain silent.

Key words: class participation, demotivation factors, EFL, students' perceptions.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio de corte cualitativo fue las razones y los factores que pudieran desalentar la participación, dentro del salón de clases, de un grupo de estudiantes de una licenciatura en inglés como lengua extranjera, ofertada en el estado de Veracruz, México. Mientras que estudios previos, en este mismo contexto, se han enfocado en los factores que afectan la participación en clase en general, este estudio involucró entrevistas y observaciones para obtener una visión amplia de los factores que impactan los niveles de participación, en términos de producción oral de este grupo de estudiantes de inglés. Este estudio se enfoca en los hábitos de participación de los estudiantes y sus percepciones de los factores que pudieran inhibirla, que desmotivan a los involucrados para participar ampliamente en clase, así como sus posibles efectos en el aprendizaje. Los datos sugieren que la percepción de lo que los entrevistados entienden por participación, así como su nivel de autoestima y de confianza afectan su nivel de involucramiento. Los resultados también indican que el papel de los profesores es una variable importante por la cual los estudiantes deciden permanecer en silencio.

Palabras clave: factores desmotivadores, inglés como lengua extranjera, participación en clase, percepciones de estudiantes.

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo de corte qualitativo foi descobrir a natureza dos fatores que puderam desanimar a participação, dentro da sala de aulas, de estudantes de uma licenciatura de inglês como língua estrangeira em Veracruz, México. Enquanto os estudos prévios se enfocaram nos fatores que afetam a participação em sala de aula em geral, este estudo envolveu entrevistas a profundidade e observações para obter uma visão ampla dos fatores que impactam os níveis de participação de estudantes de inglês. Este estudo se enfoca nos hábitos de participação dos estudantes e as suas percepções dos fatores que pudessem inibi-la, que desmotivam os participantes para participar amplamente em aula, assim como os seus possíveis efeitos negativos na palavra. Os dados sugerem que a percepção de participação dos entrevistados e seu nível de autoestima e de confiança afetam seu nível de participação. Os resultados também indicam que o papel dos professores é uma variável importante pela qual os estudantes decidem permanecer em silêncio.

Palavras chave: Falta de motivação; estudantes de inglês; participação; percepções; fatores de participação; autoestima; confiança

Introduction

The urge to carry out this study stems, on the one hand, from our teaching experience, and on the other, from conversations with students who were notoriously shy in terms of class participation, as they seldom, if ever, contributed anything at all: an opinion, a comment, an answer to the teacher's questions, et cetera, in the course of a class.

It must be highlighted that is a recurring problem, as in every class, every semester, there is a considerable number of students who choose to remain silent in class, while the burden, so to speak, of class participation is borne by a limited number of their classmates. This can often cause frustration and disappointment in many of my colleagues, as their efforts to create a highly participative environment in class do not seem to bear fruit. In addition, when confronted when their low involvement in class, most of our students' reactions to attempts to find out what prevents them from participating in class have consisted in vague, elusive answers that can be summarized as "It's just that I don't like speaking in class".

In view of this, we decided to run a full, small-scale research study, within the context of a specific school of languages, where class interaction could be observed and the students could be interviewed, to try to discover the reasons behind poor motivation to participate in class. Our hypothesis was that this might be a multifactorial phenomenon that could involve the students' attitudes and believes as well as the teachers' class management. Thus, we set out to design a study to collect data to prove or disprove the accurateness of our assumptions.

However, the first step was to clarify the meaning of participation, which Wenger (1998) defines as "a process of taking part in something and […] the relations with others that reflect the process. A complex process that combines doing, talking, feeling, and belonging" (p. 55).

Becoming involved in something; that is, participating, helps people to learn about many things by sharing their perspectives and learning from others (Reid, Jensen, Nickel & Simovska, 2008). Consequently, participation is assumed to be a beneficial part of any learning process. For example, Smith (1977) defines participation as the students' act of making questions and comments; it helps them to explore their own knowledge, develop thinking skills, and enhances their intellectual development.

In particular, in the case of EFL learning, participation is a means by which students can express their interest in the topic, and practice their learning abilities, as well as their writing, listening, and speaking skills (Czekanski & Wolf, 2013). Furthermore, Shindler (2003) points out that there is a bond between students' development and classroom participation, where classroom participation helps them to keep to their task and engage in cooperative work.

Nevertheless, classroom participation often seems to be a challenging task. Despite being aware of the importance of participation, many students choose to be silent in class. Participation is not only constructed by students' knowledge and skills; it also depends on other important factors such as the teacher's attitude, the classroom environment, and the students' interests, personality, skills, and motivation (Murray & Lang, 1997).

There are factors, however, that might discourage learners from achieving the goal of learning a foreign language. A closer inspection of these factors may help to understand what causes students' limited or active participation. This inquiry focused on analyzing the various factors that may de-motivate learners to participate in an intermediate EFL classroom.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the factors that may demotivate students' classroom participation by exploring learners' perceptions. These questions were posed:

> What is the nature de-motivation to participate in the EFL classroom in a group of intermediate English level students?

> Why do some students rarely participate in class, while others frequently do so?

> Why is it difficult for some students to participate in class?

Literature Review

Participation can be seen in different ways by different teachers and students. For the purpose of this paper, it must be understood as either short exchanges between students and teachers, or between students and students, or a long conversation in a pair working activity (Allwright, Allwright, & Bailey, 1991). It must be highlighted that classroom participation refers to the students' active classroom involvement, which in some cases, can influence the teacher's grading scheme. In other words, participation can be viewed as an integral part of the evaluation process (Petress, 2006). It can also be considered as proof of an engagement with the teacher, their classmates and active involvement with the content of the lesson (Petress, 2006; Mustaphaa, Suryani, Rahmanb, & Yunusc, 2010).

According to Petress (2006), "class participation is composed of three evaluative dimensions: quantity, dependability, and quality" (p. 1). The quantity dimension refers to the opportunities each student has to express their ideas and opinions as evidence of their awareness regarding class discussion. Dependability is defined as the relevant and constructive contributions of students when appropriate. Quality participation denotes the regular interaction in class during which students demonstrate evidence

of their awareness concerning the topic of discussion. These three dimensions have the same purpose, but they may have a different weighting in different moments of the class (Petress, 2006).

One of the benefits of participation in EFL settings, and more specially, in the context of this study, is that students who are active participants have the opportunity to practice the target language. I agree with the view that students' improvement in the language learning process is reflected in what students can say in the target language, as opposed to what they want to say (Swain, 1985). In addition, there is substantial evidence to support the notion that teachers and peers' feedback during or after their participation gives students the opportunity to be corrected and achieve their goal of speaking the language (Czekanski & Wolf, 2010; Rocca, 2010).

Additionally, students take responsibility for their learning when they are encouraged to participate in classroom tasks (Mohd, Noor, & Maizatul, 2012). Thus, it can be safely argued that learners develop their communicative and analytical presentation skills through their interactions with peers and teachers. As a group, they develop their collaborative and team-working skills (Ho, 2007).

As teachers. it is necessary to bear in mind that, in order to promote active participation, a safe environment is a continuous process that should begin from the first day of classes (Michael & Modell, 2003). Maintaining a positive and secure environment promotes positive teacher-student interactions; it engages appropriate students' behavior, classroom management, and active classroom participation (Reifman, 2008). The physical environment can be defined as the students' learning space that facilitates the learners' movement, activities development, and fluency of active learning (Scarlett, 2015; Hue & Li, 2008). "The physical space in the classroom stimulates and facilitates students' use of the target language they have previously been introduced to and practiced with the teacher" (Robinson & Kang, as cited in Schwartz, 2018, p.7). According to Michael and Modell (2003) "students will not participate in an active learning environment if they do not feel safe doing so" (p. 68). A safe place to learn encourages students to generate and share ideas during class discussion, teamwork, and individual tasks (Shepherd & Linn, 2015). The effective use of physical space, where students spend most of their learning time, has a significant effect on their classroom participation. (Hue & Li, 2008; Crawford, 2004).

The size of a group also matters. In a classroom with fewer students, they are likely to have more opportunities for significant participation than those in other classrooms with many students (Allwright et al., 1991; Tode, 2008; Howard, Geller, Rubin, & Nodvin, 2006). In contrast, a large group of students inhibits classroom participation, as they are aware of the time for, and the quality of, their contributions. Students might feel concerned that there are no significant opportunities for classroom participation and teacher's feedback (Edwards & Liu, 2008).Teachers' practice, attitudes, and motivation

As Fritschner (2000) points out, the teacher's attitude is an important factor in students' motivation and involvement in the lesson. Some teachers might encourage students to feel enthusiastic about learning a new language, whereas others might succeed in making students think negatively (Aulls, 2004). Therefore, one of the necessary roles of the teacher is to encourage students to develop the use of the target language in the classroom (Fritschner, 2000). The extent to which they motivate or do not motivate may influence or affect students when making decisions about whether or not to share their ideas and opinions (Hennessy & Warwick, 2013; Allwright et al., 1991).

It is true that many teachers may have difficulties in the way they teach and approach course content organization (Peterson, 2001). Ho (2007) claims that "traditional methods have an impact on the way language lessons are developed […] Most of the classes are very bond to the teacher-centered classroom and minimal participation" (p. 7). Several researchers stress that a language lesson designed to be relevant in learners' discussions and interaction helps them to develop their communicative skills (Ho, 2007; Rocca, 2010). In addition, the clearer the definition and reason to participate, the more meaningful the participation will be (Allwright et al., 1991).

Another important aspect is the time the teacher allows for participation. Students might want to participate, but sometimes the teacher does not plan for enough time for the students to speak up (Czekanski & Wolf, 2010). If participation is part of the evaluating schema or assessment of learning, teachers must let students know that participation is an important component of their grades, and thus, they must be given more time than usual (Rocca, 2010; Zacharias, 2014; Mustaphaa, et al, 2010).

Finally, feedback can be a meaningful process of interaction and dialogue between the teacher and the student (Reifman, 2008). Multiple sources and types of feedback allow students to develop their ability to monitor and evaluate their own learning and behavior, as well as become more independent of their teachers (Reifman, 2008). Mckeachie and Svinicki (2011) claim that "feedback must be geared to strengthening the students' ability to judge the quality of their own work" (p. 114). Feedback benefits students when they receive it and when they have the chance to generate their own feedback while producing an assignment (Mckeachie & Svinicki, 2011). In sum, the adequate use of feedback in the classroom can make students' feel valued and boost their self-esteem and confidence (Reifman, 2008).

Students' learning styles

Teachers sometimes ask students to participate when they do not know their needs (Mustaphaa, et al 2010). A visual centered activity might not have the same impact on a kinesthetic student as on a visual student, consequently, their amount of participation will be different (Allwright et al., 1991). In addition, some students choose to be

passive participants because they think they learn more by listening and keeping quiet. However, they are paying attention to the class by using strategies such as taking notes (Mustaphaa, et al, 2010; Zacharias, 2014). Therefore, a mixture of instructional activities for all learning styles is recommendable to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and provide quality participation (Mustaphaa, et al 2010).

A student's personality is another significant aspect. Passive participants tend to be shy, have low self-esteem, or suffer from anxiety (Tatar, 2005). Any combination of these characteristics may make students less likely to contribute to in-class group discussions and participate voluntarily (Rollins, 2014; Grossman, 2004; Allwright et al., 1991). Attitudes towards the class, the teacher, or classmates can impact students' decisions to participate in activities or interact (Reifman, 2008). Students might express a negative attitude towards participation if they have had unpleasant experiences such as forced participation or negative criticism from peers (Allwright et al., 1991). Then again, if students believe that their contributions to the lesson help them to gain knowledge and confidence in speaking the language, they will be more likely to participate and appreciate being corrected by their teachers (Tatar, 2005). If students have a positive perception of participation, they are also more likely to contribute to the class (Hill, 2007).

Students' motivation to learn a new language matters because it influences how and if students achieve their goal in language learning (Allwright et al., 1990). According to research on motivation by Clement, Gardner, and Smythe (1977) in Canada, learners who receive encouragement, tend to be much more active in class, volunteer more, and provide more responses that are correct. When the teacher shows students that their contributions and ideas are important for the class and their learning process, the probability of the students' positive response to every activity, including class participation, increases (Madrid & Pérez, 2001; Mohd, Noor, & Maizatul, 2012).

Negative peer pressure inhibits students' confidence in participation and lowers learners' motivation level (Tatar, 2005). Certain learners may feel embarrassed because of their peers' reactions, which can change considerably the level of their class participation. Even if students have the appropriate English level, they may be afraid of peers' reaction to an incorrect answer or imperfect pronunciation (Aulls, 2004). In spite of having the required oral skills, they may find it difficult to produce the language if they have had prior unpleasant experience (Rollins, 2014). While some students do not pay attention to criticisms from their classmates, others may have a difficult time while reading aloud or sharing an idea (Grossman, 2004).

To sum up, a poorly managed class, combined with the students' personal fears and feelings often makes students avoid participation because of negative past experiences associated with participation (Rocca, 2010). The fear of failing or making mistakes can make students feel anxious, which inhibits students' ability to use and develop their communicative skills in the target language (Aulls, 2004; Allwright et al., 1991).

Methodology

The research approach used in this inquiry was of a qualitative nature. The aim of this case study was to collect data on a topic of interest to come up with an explanation to an observed phenomenon. This facilitated understanding regarding the connection between the problems or issues and the participants by exploring their personal background and prior experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Creswell, 2014). The data were collected by observing the setting and making an interpretation of the meaning of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Creswell, 2014; Hartas, 2010). This was done by sitting in classes and observing: a) whether teachers demanded participation from their students; b) whether they participated voluntarily; and c) how often and for how long this happened. Then, the data from the observations was triangulated with input from the interviews and the field notes. The aim was to gather information that would answer the main research question by understanding the setting, and the perceptions of a representative sample of participants (Yin, 2012; Mertens, 2005).

The data collection methods helped us to understand the problem and gain answers to the research questions. The selection of the methods was based on the nature of the issues and objectives (Creswell, 2014; Hartas, 2010). The particular methods used in this qualitative inquiry were non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and field notes.

The type of non-participant observation carried out for this study required attending sitting in a classroom and observing the many aspects of the classroom context such as the environment, the teacher, the student, activities, and interactions. This allowed for a firsthand encounter with the social reality of classroom participation and the EFL students without being part of it. For the interviews, we talked openly with the participants about the topic using specific questions which were relevant to the objectives of the research: the perspective of students on classroom participation and what is needed to motivate students to participate. These semi-structured interviews were flexible and the order of the questions changed while the interview developed (Kanazawa, 2018). Even though some of the questions were somewhat spontaneous, they were connected with the topic. As for the field notes, they were written down on the same observation sheets used as a guide. These notes helped to describe what we heard and saw to create data. An advantage of this method was that it allowed me to write down a considerable amount of information collected during the classroom observation.

We observed the many aspects of the classroom context such as the environment, the teacher, the student, activities, and interactions. We used an observation sheet containing the categories and objectives of the inquiry (Hayward, 2000), which facilitated the emergence of data in answer to the main research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Five two-hour long observations—at different times and days—were

carried out over a period of three weeks in the middle of the semester. They focused on the students and the teacher. Notes were made of what was happening in relation to the participants and the activities, i.e., teacher's actions and responses, and students actions and responses.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the participants' perceptions and their realities, as well as capture their concepts regarding the chosen topic. The interviews were of an informal nature in order to focus on the specifics of the conversation (Schuh & Associates, 2009; Kanazawa, 2018; Raworth, Sweetman, Narayan, Rowlands, & Hopkins, 2012). The interview consisted of 12 open-ended questions that explored the participants' perceptions of classroom participation, the difficulties they face in the classroom regarding participation, and the frequency of voluntary and non-voluntary participation in the classroom.

Field notes were also taken down to account for details and document characteristics of the social setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Bailey, 2007). Bailey (2007, p.113) claims that "field notes serve as the repository for the important and even not-so-important data of field research". As stated above, these notes focused on the teacher's actions and responses: demands on students to participate, specific amount of time for classroom participation, clarification before participation, feedback during/and/or after participation, kind of feedback provided, and encouragement to participate. They also focused on the students' actions and responses: frequency of participation, active contributions of the students' points of view and ideas to class discussions, self-initiated participation, focus and interest, cooperativeness and responsiveness, nervousness or reluctance to participate, response to feedback, and disruption and interruptions.

The data analysis process sought situational perspectives to understand the personal experiences of participants (Davies & Hughes, 2014). An open coding system was used. We classified the findings in order to give them a label that represented the phenomenon (Mertens, 2005). We integrated categories and subcategories such as behavior, meanings, and participation. There were four categories: 1) the students' perceptions regarding classroom participation; 2) difficulty on the part of some students to participate in class; and 3) reasons why some students rarely participate while others frequently do so. The subcategories had to do with the questions the interviewees were asked. Then, we put together the data after sorting them out in the open coding. Finally, we chose each category and related it to another to proceed to a more theoretical level of analysis (Allen, 2017; Urquhart, 2013). Constant comparison of data was a fundamental procedure. Coding procedures were used as an analytical technique to examine and link the categories found in the data (Charmaz, 2014; Allen, 2017).

This research study was carried out at a public university in Veracruz, Mexico. A six-level series of English books are used to cover six English courses that are

part of the program. By the end of the last level, students must demonstrate a sound command of English. All professors must include some form of participation as part of their students' final grade. As a matter of school policy, participation accounts for 10% of the students' grades. However, expectations regarding the quality of students' participation, as well as the ways to encourage them to participate are rather vague.

As for the participants, there were 21 male and female participants; their ages ranging between 19 and 23. They were a group of undergraduate students enrolled in the Intermediate English course of a BA in English Language. Purposive sampling strategy was used in this inquiry as it was considered that a certain population would be able to provide rich information and data to analyze (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Four participants were selected for the interviews. Their points of view as expressed in the interviews were analyzed to attempt to discover the meaning of their experience. All the participants gave their consent to participate and to use the information for investigation purposes. Pseudonyms were used instead of their real names to safeguard confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

Before discussing the de-motivational factors that influence students' classroom participation, it is important to know how students define their participation. According to the participants, sharing their opinions, ideas, comments, stories, and knowledge with teachers and peers are ways of being participative in class. They stated that in their English language class, they could transfer their knowledge and apply what they knew by using their speaking skills in the classroom. They added that participation helps them to analyze their mistakes in their spoken English since class participation is mainly based on oral communication. Harry (pseudonyms are used instead of real names) one of the participants, defined participation as follows:

> To share with others and the teacher your knowledge or the knowledge that you are acquiring, your opinion, your point of view.

Harry pointed out that participation also involves asking the teacher questions and answering when it is the teachers who ask the students questions. He indicated that verbal interaction between the teacher and the students—which includes listening, responding, making contributions, and sharing stories and experiences— are ways for the students to participate and become involved in the learning process. The above echoes Swain's (1985) claim that participation may demonstrate students' target language competence and their level of confidence when they speak the language.

Since participation is defined as the act of offering comments in class, raising questions, and expressing their interest in the topic (Smith, 1977), it may be argued

that it helps students to explore their knowledge and their skills, and thus, improve their development. In the following extract, Emma, another student interviewed, described one of these benefits:

> I think that participation is important because the teacher could be aware of our strengths and weaknesses, as well as correct our pronunciation mistakes.

Emma highlighted that participation leads to important constructive and effective feedback that helps students to be aware of their learning process. This extract resonates with Reifman (2008), who states that feedback helps to empower learners to be judges of their own academic progress and achievement.

Another participant, Ronald, pointed out that classroom participation is mostly seen as a way to improve the students' speaking skills. He added he believed that oral participation in the classroom was important in the learning process of any language. As he explained:

> Most people do not practice at home; the only place where they can do so is here, at school. […] if you do not participate, you cannot improve.

In addition, the participants seemed to believe that classroom participation in their English course helps them to improve their speaking skills and develop their knowledge. They consider that their participation in their English lessons helps them to talk more and be less afraid to share their opinions in future lessons.

Most of the interviewees agreed that participation does not follow a particular pattern. They simply participate more actively when they are interested in the content being discussed. Another participant, Mary, shared:

> There are topics that make me speak easily, and when those topics are interesting to me, I research more about them, and then I speak more.

One more issue that emerged was that even though many students appear to understand the benefits of participating in the classroom, there are factors that may demotivate their participation and may cause them to experience negative feelings during the process of learning a foreign language.

It was noticed that some students seemed to regard participation as one of the tasks they are responsible for when learning. Others seemed to believe they had the right to remain silent if they preferred. These views were confirmed in the interviews. Emma, who is of this mind, explained:

> I am one of those people who observe and learn. I do not like being participative, I prefer to keep quiet and observe everything around me.

Thus, it may be argued that students who are listeners seem to avoid oral participation because they think they learn more by listening (Mustaphaa, et al. 2010). It was also noticed that the teacher had to ask for volunteers because nobody wanted to participate. Emma remarked:

> *He asks us to participate but nobody complies, so he decides to ask someone questions.*

Dominic, one of the talkative ones, explained:

> *The teacher has to force us to participate in a certain way because, well, we are few students who sometimes decide to participate.*

Some students seemed to understand the importance of participation but did not complete some of the homework activities that were part of the class participation. Harry, for example, who often failed to do his homework, which caused him to feel frustrated by the awareness that he was being irresponsible, explained:

> *Sometimes I feel frustrated but it is my fault because most of the time, in this particular situation, I cannot participate because I do not do the activities from the workbook.*

It would seem, therefore, that their choices as well as their perceptions influence their decision to participate. They are willing to participate if they believe it is their role in the learning process; if not, they remain silent.

When learning a foreign language, a student's journey might be stressful owing to their fear of making mistakes, of not contributing to the class, or even of failing. For example, Molly stated:

> *I do not see the point in participating because nothing I say is relevant. So, I rather remain silent.*

These negative feelings and personal fears, often associated with negative past experiences which may make students avoid participation, are also highlighted by Allwright et al. (1991). Feeling anxious, stressed, or having a very low level of self-confidence appear to be some of the reasons that make students unable to use the target language and participate in the classroom (Tatar, 2005). Harry mentioned what he feels when he participates:

> *Well, I feel somewhat nervous, I cannot think straight and I do not know what to say. I do not know how to answer or maybe I do, but at that time, my anxiety makes me feel confused.*

This lack of self-confidence and nervousness may result in less or no participation at all in their English class. This also appears to happen to students who like or want

to participate but do not want to be corrected in front of their classmates. As Mary mentions:

> *I mean, I like to participate but I would rather not do it since I speak very softly. When it happens, it is like "we cannot hear you". Then, I panic.*

This extract brings to mind Allwright et al. (1991), who state that passive participants tend to be shy, have low self-esteem, or suffer from anxiety.

The teacher's strategies.

The importance of the teacher's role in fostering interaction and participation in L2 class is well documented in the literature. In this study, the students highlighted how the teacher's attitudes, the teacher's strategies to call on participants, and their ability to motivate their students, affects classroom participation.

Molly mentioned that she did not understand the way the teacher demanded participation from the students. She claimed that she did not understand when she was supposed to raise her hand and talk. She said that when she had tried to contribute something to the lesson, the teacher had not paid her any attention. Therefore, as the teacher never asked her to participate, she decided to remain silent because:

> *I know the teacher is going to choose the same people.*

She also seems to think that this might happen because the teacher likes some students more than others, which affects her interest negatively.

> *I lost the interest to participate, now that I know that he is going to ask the same students. So, I do not see the point in participating if he is not going to ask me. I already lost my interest.*

If the teacher does not show the students that their contributions and ideas are important for the class and their learning process, the probability of students' negative response to activities, including class participation, may increase (Peterson, 2001).

In their interviews, the majority of the students claimed that motivation was important in their decision to participate. They showed a tendency to perceive the teacher as the most important part of the interaction inside the classroom. They also seemed to consider the teacher as the source of authority, responsible for generating an adequate learning process (Fritschner, 2000). As Dominic mentioned:

> *I really believe that he motivates us or gives us that boost to participate and make us be more participative in class. He says, "Come on, let's talk, that is what this class is for. Don't be afraid to make mistakes".*

However, during the interviews, a contrast in students' responses was noticed. Some of them were of the opinion that the teacher did not motivate them in the class—that she only asked them to participate—and that, sometimes, she only focused on those who did not talk much. Harry explained:

> *In this subject, I think that she only said "You! Answer!" and you have to do it. I think that she knows who is always distracted, and she is always pushing them.*

This perception seems to be supported by another student's comment, Emma, who mentioned that owing to the teacher's negative attitude, she became uninterested in the class and was often distracted with her cellphone**.**

> *I think that sometimes when the teacher gets annoyed, she has a rude attitude. So, most of the time, when we have to participate, I'd rather take out my cellphone.*

This echoes Aulls (2004) who claims that participation has emotional consequences. Aulls (2004) states that students are more active participants when they are encouraged, but rather passive when the teachers are not very interested in the students' opinions or ideas, which in turn, leads to negative emotions. In other words, when students feel motivated by the teacher, their level of self-confidence may improve, which in turn may make them less afraid to talk in the classroom.

Conclusion

The present study indicates that all the participants shared common views on participation. Some conclusions that can be drawn from the data analysis and interpretation is that A) the students' perceptions regarding classroom participation and their idea of who should be in charge of their participation were the first problems discovered; B) Most of the participants were not sure about whether or not to participate; they preferred that their teacher choose who to respond to questions; C) as for their perceptions of the classroom participation process, the participants mentioned that they were more likely to participate if the teacher first motivated them.

Nevertheless, neither highly nor poorly motivated students showed a strong tendency towards choosing to participate in class. In other words, it was found that, although the teacher motivated them, this did not ensure the students' participation in the classroom, and thus, it can be argued that, in this case, motivation alone might not guarantee student participation.

Another important finding of this study was there were emotional factors such as frustration, nervousness, lack of interest, stage fear, and anxiety, that affected classroom participation. These emotional factors impact the students' self-esteem and self-confidence. Students are often afraid to participate because they are nervous, or because they think that their contributions to the lesson are not good enough, which makes them feel uncomfortable and inhibits participation.

Finally, the impact of the teacher is very important. According to the observations and interviews, the teacher's attitudes, motivation, and strategies have an effect on the students' interest in participating and on the involvement of each student in the classroom. Most participants indicated that they are more inclined to participate in the classroom when they know their teacher is supportive, open to ideas, and will not criticize them. Raised awareness of issues concerning limited participation in class may help teachers to plan ways to encourage passive or shy students to participate actively in class. For instance, the teacher can stimulate students to share stories, debate relevant current topics, prepare and make short presentations, discuss videos, and discuss news events, among other things.

Recognition of the importance of participation may also stimulate teachers to adopt various strategies to create a favorable learning environment with more interactive and stimulating classroom activities. As an example of these strategies, we can mention the following: identifying and being respectful of students' learning strategies (they might learn better by being quiet and listening), recognizing students' feeling and being empathetic, acknowledging students', strengths and weaknesses, encouraging students to take risks, fostering a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere, giving every students the opportunity to make a contribution to the class, and letting them know that their participation is expected and welcome.

Limitations and Suggestions for further research

This was a small-scale study. Thus, its main limitation was that only a small group of students was interviewed. It must be highlighted that our findings and conclusions are limited to the viewpoints and perceptions of the group of students that participated in this study and cannot be generalized to other contexts.

It would be interesting to explore the experiences of students who are studying the same English level or diverse levels in order to determine if the English level itself, or some other factors, influence the students' lack of participation. This might provide a more comprehensive picture of the factors that influence classroom participation.

References

Allen, M. (2017). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods.* Sage Publications.

Aulls, M. W. (2004). Students' experiences with good and poor university courses. *Educational Research and Evaluation, 10*(4-6), 303-335.

Allwright, R., Allwright, D., Bailey, K. M. (1991). *Focus on the language classroom: An introduction to Classroom research for language teachers.* Cambridge University Press

Bailey, C. (2007). *A Guide to Qualitative Field Research* (2nd ed.). Pine Forge Press

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage Publishing.

Clement, R., Gardner, R. C., & Smythe, P. C. (1977). Motivational variables in second language acquisition: A study of Francophones learning English. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue Canadienne des Sciences du Comportement, 9*(2), 123-133.

Crawford, G. (2004). *Managing the Adolescent Classroom: Lessons from Outstanding Teachers*. Corwin Press.

Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications Inc.

Czekanski, E., & Wolf, Z. (2013). Encouraging and Evaluating Class Participation, *Journal of niversity Teaching & Learning Practice*, 10 (1), 2-15.

Davies, M. (2007). *Doing a successful research project.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Davies, M., & Hughes, N. (2014). *Doing a successful Research project: using qualitative or quantitative methods* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1998). *Strategies of quantitative inquiry*. Sage Publications Inc.

Edwards, J., & Liu, J. (2008). *Peer Response in Second Language Writing Classrooms* (2nd ed.). The University of Michigan Press.

Fritschner, L. M. (2000). Inside the undergraduate college classroom: Faculty and Students differ on the meaning of student participation. *The Journal of Higher Education, 71*(3), 342-362.

Grossman, H. (2004). *Classroom Behavior Management for Diverse and Inclusive Schools* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Hartas, D. (2010). *Educational Research and Inquiry: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Continuum International Publishing Group.

Hayward, C. (2000). *De-Facing Power.* Cambridge University Press.

Hennessy, S., & Warwick, P. (2013). *Developing Interactive Teaching and Learning Using the Iwb. A resource for teachers.* Open University Press.

Hill, T. (2007). *Classroom Participation.* United States Military Academy.

Ho, D. (2007). *Classroom Talk: Exploring the Sociocultural Structure of Formal ESL Learning* (2nd ed.). Peter Lang AG.

Howard, M.D., Geller, R.J., Rubin M.D., Nodvin, J. (2006). *Safe and healthy school environments*. Oxford University Press.

Hue, M, & Li, W. (2008). *Classroom management: Creating a positive learning environment* (Eds.). Hong Kong University Press.

Lang, M. (1996). *Effects of class participation on student achievement and motivation*. Retrieved from Unpublished Honours Thesis, University of Western Ontario.

Kanazawa, M. (2018). *Research Methods for Environmental Studies: A Social Science Approach.* Routledge.

Madrid Fernández, D., & Pérez Cañado, M. L. (2001). Exploring the student's motivation In the EFL class. In E. García (ed), *Present and future Trends in TEFL* (pp. 321-364). Universidad de Almería: Secretariado de Publicaciones.

Mckeachie, W., & Svinicki, M. (2011). *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers* (13th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2015). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey Bass.

Mertens, D. (2005). Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Michael, J., & Modell, H. (2003). *Active Learning in Secondary and College Science Classrooms: A Working Model for Helping the Learner to Learn.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Abdullah, M, Y., Abu Bakar, N. R., & Mahbob, M. H. (2012). Student's participation in the classroom: What motivates them to speak up? *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 51*(2012), 516-522. http//doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.08.199.

Mustaphaa, S. M., Abd Rahmanb, N. S. N., & Yunus, M. M. (2010). *Factors Influencing classroom participation: a case study of Malaysian undergraduate students.* Elsevier Ltd. https://cyberleninka.org/article/n/1141850/viewer

Murray, G., & Lang, M. (1997). *Does classroom participation improve student learning?* University of Western Ontario

Peterson, R. M. (2001). Course participation: An active learning approach employing Student documentation. *Journal of Marketing Education, 23*(3),187-194. https://doi.org/10.1177/0273475301233004

Petress, K. (2006). An Operational Definition of Class Participation. *College Student Journal, 40*(4), 821–823.

Raworth, K., Sweetman, C., Narayan, S., Rowlands, L., & Hopkins, A. (2012). *Conducting Semi-structured Interviews.* Oxfam GB.

Reid, A., Jensen, B., Nickel, J., & Simovska, V. (2008). *Participation and Learning: Perspectives on Education and the Environment, Health, and Sustainability.* Springer.

Reifman, S. (2008). *Eight Essentials for Empowered Teaching and Learning, K-8: Bringing Out the Best in Your Students.* Corwin Press.

Robinson, P., & Kang, N. (2015). *English Learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: An investigation of their effectiveness.* The British Council.

Rocca, K. (2010). Student Participation in the College Classroom: An Extended Multidisciplinary Literature Review. *Communication Education, 59*(2), 185-212. doi: 10.1080/03634520903505936.

Rollins, S. (2014). *Learning in the Fast Lane: 8 Ways to Put ALL Students on the Road to Academic Success.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Scarlett, W. (2015). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Classroom Management.* Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Schuh, J., & Associates. (2008). *Assessment Methods for Student Affairs.* Jossey Bass.

Schwartz, M. (2018). *Preschool Bilingual Education: Agency in Interactions between Children, Teachers, and Parents.* Springer International Publishing AG.

Shepherd, T., & Linn, D. (2015). *Behavior and Classroom Management in the Multicultural Classroom: Proactive, Active, and Reactive Strategies.* Sage Publications.

Shindler, J. V. (2003). Creating a more peaceful classroom community by assessing student participation and process. *The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution, 5*(1), 20-32. www.trinstitute.org/ojpcr/5_1shindler.htm

Smith, D. G. (1977). College classroom interactions and critical thinking. *Journal of Educational Phycology, 69*(2), 180-190.

Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235–253). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Tatar, S. (2005). Why keep silent? The classroom participation experiences of non-native English speaking students. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 5*(3-4), 284-293. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708470508668902

Tode, T. (2008). *Effects of Frequency in Classroom Second Language Learning: Quasi-experiment and Stimulated-recall Analysis.* Peter Lang AG.

Urquhart, C. (2013). *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: a Practical Guide. City Road*, Sage Publications.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge University Press.

Yin. R. (2012). *Applications of Case Study Research*. Sage Publications.

Zacharias, N.T. (2014). Second Language Teacher Contributions to Student Classroom Participation: A Narrative Study of Indonesian Learners. *EFTWorldOnline, 6*(1), 1-15. http://blog.nus.edu.sg/eltwo/?p=4358.

Authors

*Diana Iveth Sánchez Hernández is a part-time professor at the School of Languages of the University of Veracruz. She holds a B.A. degree in English Language and an M.A. degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, both awarded by the University of Veracruz. Currently, she is an advanced student of the Ph.D. degree program in Language Studies and Applied Linguistics from the University of Veracruz and is working on her doctoral thesis. Among her interests are topics related to English teaching and learning processes, and language and identity.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1426-5814

Enrique Vez López is a full-time professor at the School of Languages of the University of Veracruz. He holds a B.A. degree in English Language and a Specialization degree in English Language Teaching, both awarded by the University of Veracruz, an M.A. degree in Education awarded by Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA, and a Ph.D. in Language Studies awarded by the University of Veracruz. Among his published work feature papers related to English teaching and learning processes, language and culture, and language death.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1117-5386

Yeraldi García Barrios is an English teacher at private school in Xalapa, Veracruz. She holds a B.A. degree in English Language. Among her interests are carrying further into teaching English as a foreign language and teaching Spanish to foreign students and furthering her education in this field.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8008-6120

Appendix

Semi-structured interview guide

Length: 15-25 minutes

M ☐   **F** ☐   **Age:** ———

Brief interviewer's introduction, and explanation of the purpose of the interview. Once the participant feels comfortable, invite interviewee to briefly introduce him/herself. Prepare the gadget for recording, and then continue with the next questions:

Objective: to know students' perceptions regarding classroom participation

1. Can you explain in your own words what classroom participation is?

    - Can you give an example?

2. What do you think about participation?

    - What are the benefits?

3. Describe how participation is developed in your classroom.

4. How does your teacher call on students to participate in your classroom?

    - Does your teacher give a specific amount of time for classroom participation?

    - Does your teacher motivate students to participate? If so, how?

    - Can you give an example of that?

Why is it difficult for some students to participate in class?

5. Does the teacher make the topic clear before asking for participation?

    - How?

6. Does the teacher give feedback during or after participation?

    - How?

7. How does receiving feedback make you feel? Can you give an example?

8. How would you prefer the teacher to give you feedback: written, oral, personal, general, to correct all your mistakes on the spot, not to correct all your mistakes?

Why do some students rarely participate in class, while others frequently do so?

9.   How often do you participate?

10.   How often do you participate in the classroom if not called on?

      - Is it easy or difficult for you?

11.   How do you feel when you are asked to participate?

      - Do you feel comfortable? Why or why not?

12.   Tell me about a time when you had to participate, but you didn't want to.

      - What were you asked to do?

      - How did you feel?

      - Did you feel anxious or nervous? Why or why not?

      - Why do you think you felt like that?

13.   Tell me about a time when you wanted to participate, but you could not do it.

      - What were you asked to do?

      - How did you feel?

   Did it affect your interest in participation during the rest of the class?

   - Why or why not?

   Note: Additional follow-up questions were asked, as appropriate, with each participant.

Observation sheet

Specific questions:

1. Why is it difficult for some students to participate in class?

2. Why do some students rarely participate in class, while others frequently do?

Date	Observation #:	Teacher:	No. Boys:	No. Girls:

Classroom sitting arrangement

	Activity	Teacher's actions and responses	Additional field notes
How often does teacher call on students to participate in the classroom.			
Specific amount of time for classroom participation.			
The teacher makes the topic clear before asking for participation.			
The teacher gives feedback during and/or after participation.			
What kind of feedback does the teacher employ?			
The teacher encourages students to give their opinions about the topic			
How often do students participate?			
Do students actively participate in class activities and discussions?			
Do students provide useful ideas when participating in classroom discussion?			

	Activity	Teacher's actions and responses	Additional field notes
Student initiates contribution and asks for input and/or feedback.			
Students are focused and interested.			
Students are cooperative and responsive.			
Students seem nervous or reluctant to participate.			
How do students respond to feedback?			
How often do students participate if not called on?			
Students refuse to Participate.			
Students often disrupt or discourage others' attempts to participate.			